

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 000976

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/21/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [IT](#) [EUN](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIA/LEBANON: ITALY STILL PLANS TO HOST FM SHARA'A IN ROME

REF: A. STATE 44087

[B](#). ROME 878

Classified By: DCM Emil Skodon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Italian MFA has given serious consideration to our request that Italy postpone the April 6 visit of Syrian FM Shara'a but, barring major changes on the ground in Lebanon, still plans to go through with the visit. Rome continues to view engagement as the best way to deal with Damascus, and views Italy as the US' most forceful ally in delivering a tough message. End summary.

"It's in our DNA"

[1](#)2. (C) DCM, Pol MC and Poloff met with Riccardo Sessa, the DG for the Mediterranean and Middle East, and Luca Ferrari, Office Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, on March 21 in follow-up to our March 14 demarche (Ref B) asking Italy to postpone Syrian FM Shara'a's planned April 6 visit to Rome, at least until Syria announces a firm timetable for full withdrawal from Lebanon. Sessa said that Italy, as always, is taking our request very seriously because of its close relationship with the United States and Italy's special interest in the region. He said that the MFA agrees in general terms with our assessment of the situation in Lebanon, but disagrees about postponing FM Shara'a's April 6 visit, explaining that "it's in (Italy's) DNA" to maintain an open dialogue with "rogue states" even if Rome is skeptical about the immediate results of engagement. Sessa underscored that he had discussed our demarche directly with FM Fini and Secretary General Vattani and both had "blessed" the view

SIPDIS

that the Shara'a visit should not be postponed.

[1](#)3. (C) Sessa likened Syrian President Asad to Qaddafi, arguing that Bashar "gets it" and is reacting to the strong pressure of the international community. By closing the door to dialogue, he argued, the US deprives itself of the opportunity to have a reliable partner like Italy deliver a tough message to Damascus. Furthermore, Ferrari noted, closing the door in Italy would only open another one somewhere else, such as Greece or Spain, where the US has a much less reliable ally and one whose voice would not resonate as widely. (Note: Ferrari said Athens, though not confirmed, probably will be on Shara'a's European itinerary, as well as the Holy See. End note.)

[1](#)4. (C) Both Sessa and Ferrari argued that Italy has been the most aggressive EU member state when it comes to dealing with rogue states. They cited several examples of Italy's toughness on Syria and its commitment to the US position, including Fini's tough message to Shara'a during his January visit to Damascus, Italy's statement -- the strongest in the EU -- after the Harari bombing, Italy's modification of its position on Hezbollah at last week's EU Clearing House meeting (Ref B). Fini's March 8 statement on Lebanon differed from other EU states' in its explicit reference to the other requirement of UNSC 1559, the disarmament of militias. The focus, our contacts argued, should not be on whether or not to meet with the Syrians, but on what to say.

It's the Syrians, not the Italians

[1](#)5. (C) DCM pushed back, saying that the US is fully confident of Italy's commitment and ability to deliver a tough message. The issue under discussion was not Italy's intentions, but rather Syria's. Unfortunately, going forward with the meeting runs the very likely risk that Syria will use it to further its own goals and stall for time, citing European support. Syria, he said, is only moving because of international pressure, not because Damascus suddenly has seen the light. Transatlantic cohesion is what has caused Syria to begin to move. At a minimum, he argued, Italy should postpone the visit until Syria agrees to a fixed timetable for withdrawal.

[1](#)6. (C) Ferrari countered that the April 6 meeting could be viewed from an opposite angle, as the last chance to send the Syrians a tough message before the Lebanese and Syrian

military committees meet on April 7 to set a timeframe for

Syrian withdrawal. Ferrari argued that the Syrians are already moving toward withdrawal, and that international pressure is at the bottom of the list of explanations, following fears of an internal Sunni-Maronite uprising, Arab pressure, and the "Saddamization" of Syria that would give the US an excuse to intervene militarily.

Agreeing to Disagree

17. (C) Sessa mused that the best outcome might be if Shara'a himself asked to postpone the visit so that he could participate in the April 7 military committee meetings. DCM said that if this happened, Italy needed to think ahead about how it would react to different outcomes. If the Lebanese and Syrians decided on April 7 that a full withdrawal would be completed in two weeks, before Lebanon's elections, that would be one thing; but what if they agreed on a 12-month timetable? Would Italy then still go forward with a Shara'a visit? Sessa concluded the meeting stating that, for the moment, Italy does not intend to postpone the visit. However, he suggested that we revisit the issue again next week to see if there are any changes in the Syrian position that would merit a postponement.

Prime Minister's Office Takes a Different Approach

18. (C) DCM raised the Shara'a visit in the course of a separate meeting later on March 21 with PM Berlusconi's top diplomatic advisor, Giovanni Castellaneta. Castellaneta said that he had raised the issue in a March 18 telcon with NSA Hadley and that he shared our view on the need to pressure the Syrians. He opined that Bashar might even appreciate a postponement as he tries to distance himself from the "old guard" that Shara'a represents. Castellaneta promised to discuss the issue directly with FM Fini on March 22.

19. (C) Comment. Sessa was eager to demonstrate to us that the MFA is taking our concerns about Syria seriously. However, the Italians' desire to accommodate us on this issue is at odds with their own (self-inflated?) image as the most effective EU player in the Middle East and, more significantly, their conviction that they can play a useful role when it comes to Syria and that dialogue is the way to go. Given that their message has been "blessed" from the top of the MFA, it probably will take an equally strong hand from our side or from PM Berlusconi's office -- or a misstep by the Syrians -- to persuade them to change their mind. End comment.

SEMBLER

NNNN

2005ROME00976 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL